

Billy's Tenderfoot

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE

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DURING one spring of the early seventies Billy Knapp ran a species of road house or hotel at the crossing of the Deadwood and Big Horn trails through Custer valley. Travelers changing from one route to the other frequently stopped there overnight. He sold accommodations for man and beast, comprising plenty of whisky and plenty of hay. That was the best any one could say of it. The hotel was of logs, two storied, with partitions of sheeting to insure a certain privacy of sight if not of sound; had three beds and a number of bunks and boasted of a woman cook, one of the first in the hills. Billy did not run it long. He was too restless.

The personnel of the establishment consisted of Billy and the woman already mentioned and an ancient Pistol by the name of Charley. The latter wore many firearms and had a good deal to say, but had never, as Billy expressed it, "made good." This in the west could not have been for lack of opportunity. His functions were those of general factotum.

One evening Billy sat chair tilted against the logs of the hotel, waiting for the stake. By and by it drew in. Charley hobbled out, carrying buckets of water for the horses. The driver swung the reins from him with the lordly insolence of his class, descended slowly and swaggered to the barroom for his drink. Billy followed to serve it.

"Luck!" said the driver and crooked his elbow.

"Anything new?" queried Billy.

"Nope."

"Held up?"

"Nope."

That exhausted the situation. The two men puffed silently for a moment at their pipes. In an instant the driver turned to go.

"I got you a tenderfoot," he remarked casually. "I reckon he's outside."

"Guess I ambles forth and sees what for a tenderfoot it is," replied Billy, hastening from behind the bar.

The tenderfoot was seated on a small trunk just outside the door. As he held his hat in his hands Billy could see his domelike bald head. Beneath the dome was a little pink and white face, and below that were narrow, sloping shoulders, a flat chest and bumpy legs. He wore a light check suit and a flannel shirt whose collar was much too large for him. Billy took this all in while passing. As the driver climbed to the seat the hotel-keeper commented.

"Say, Hen," said he, "would you stuff it or put it under a glass case?"

"I'd serve it a lay too loose," replied the driver briefly, and he brought his long lash 8-shaped across the four startled backs of his horses.

Billy turned to a reinspection of his guest and met a deprecating smile.

"Can I get a shakedown here for tonight?" he inquired in a high, piping voice.

"You kin," replied Billy shortly and began to howl for Charley.

That patriarch appeared around the corner, as did likewise the cook, a

black eyed, red cheeked creature, afterward counted by Billy as one of his eight matrimonial ventures.

"Snake this stranger's war bag into th' shack," commanded Billy. "And, Nell, jest nat'rally rustle a few grub."

The stranger picked up a small hand satchel and followed Charley into the building. When, a little later, he reappeared for supper he carried the hand bag with him and placed it under the bench which flanked the table. Afterward he deposited it next his hand while enjoying a pipe outside. Naturally all this did not escape Billy.

"Stranger," said he, "yo' seems mighty wedded to that thar satchel."

"Yes, sir," piped the stranger. Billy snorted at the title. "I has some personal belongings which is valuable to me." He opened the bag and produced a cheap portrait of a rather cheap looking woman. "My mother that was," said he.

Billy snorted again and went inside. He hated sentiment of all kinds. The two men sat opposite each other and ate supper, which was served by the red cheeked girl. The stranger kept his

eyes on his plate while she was in the room. He perched on the edge of the bench with his feet tucked under him and resting on their toes. When she approached, the muscles of his shoulders and upper arms grew rigid with embarrassment, causing strange, awkward movements of the hands. He answered in monosyllables.

Billy ate expansively and earnestly. Toward the close of the meal Charley slipped out of place beside him. Charley was out of humor and found the meat cold.

"— yore soul, Nell," he cried, "this yere ain't fitten for a hog to eat!"

The girl did not mind, nor did Billy. It was the country's mode of speech. The stranger dropped his knife.

"I don't wonder yo' don't like it, then," said he with a funny little flare of anger.

"Meanin' what?" shouted Charley threateningly.

"You shore mustn't speak to a lady that way," replied the stranger firmly. In his little piping voice.

Billy caught the point and exploded in a mighty guffaw.

"Bully fer you!" he cried, slapping his knee. "Struck pyrites"—he pronounced it "pie rights"—"fer shore that trip, Charley."

The girl, too, laughed, but quietly. She was a little touched, though just this winter she had left Bismarck because the place would have no more of her.

In the face of Billy's approval the old man fell silent.

About midnight the four inmates of the frontier hotel were awakened by a tremendous racket outside. The stranger arose, fully clothed, from his bunk and peered through the narrow open window. A dozen horses were standing grouped in charge of a single mounted man, indistinguishable in the dark. Out of the open door a broad band of light streamed from the saloon, whence came the noise of voices and of boots tramping about.

"It is Black Hank," said Billy, at his elbow. "Black Hank and his outfit. He hitches to this yere snubbin' post occasional."

Black Hank in the hills would have translated to Jesse James farther south.

The stranger turned suddenly energetic.

"Don't you make no fight?" he asked.

"Fight!" said Billy, wondering. "Fight! Co'se not. Hank ain't plundarin' me none. He jest ambles along and helps himself, and leaves the dust for it every shot. I jest lays low and lets him operate. I never has no dealin's with him, understand. He jest nat'rally waites in and plants his grub hooks on what he needs. I doesn't know anything about it. I'm dead asleep."

He bestowed a shadowy wink upon the stranger.

Below, the outlaws moved here and there.

"Billy!" shouted a commanding voice. "Billy Knapp!"

The hotel-keeper looked perplexed.

"Now what's he tollin' me fer?" he asked of the man by his side.

"Billy," shouted the voice again. "come down here, you swash. I want to palaver with you."

"All right, Hank," replied Billy. He went to his "room" and buckled on a heavy belt, then descended the steep stairs.

The barroom was lighted and filled with men. Some of them were eating and drinking; others were strapping provisions into portable form. Against the corner of the bar a tall figure of a man leaned, smoking—a man like, active and muscular, with a keen, dark face and black eyebrows which met over his nose. Billy walked directly to this man.

"What is it?" he inquired shortly.

"This yere ain't in th' agreement."

"I know that," replied the stranger.

"Then leave yore dust and vamoose."

"My dust is there," said Black Hank, placing his hand on a buckskin bag at his side, "and you're paid, Billy Knapp. I want to ask you a question. Standin' Rock has sent \$50,000 to Buck Tail. The messenger went through here today. Have you seen him?"

"Narry messenger," replied Billy in relief. "Stage goes empty."

Charley had crept down the stairs and into the room.

"What 'n blazes you doin' yere, you rankaboo jilt?" asked Billy truculently.

"That thar stage ain't what you calls empty," observed Charley, unmoved. A light broke on Billy's mind. He remembered the valise which the stranger had so carefully guarded, and, though his common sense told him that an inoffensive noncombatant, such as his guest, would hardly be chosen as express messenger, still the bare possibility remained.

"Yo're right," he assented carelessly; "thar is one tenderfoot who knows as much of ridin' express as a pig does of war."

"I notice he's almighty particular 'bout that thar carpetbag of his," insisted Charley.

The man against the counter had lost nothing of the scene. Billy's denial, his hesitation, his half truth, all looked suspicious to him. With one swift round sweep of the arm he had Billy

covered. Billy's arms shot over his head without the necessity of a command.

The men ceased their occupations and gathered about. Scenes of this sort were too common to elicit comment or arouse excitement. They knew perfectly the laissez-faire relations which obtained between the two westerners.

"Now," said Black Hank angrily in a low tone, "I want to know why you tried that monkey game."

Billy, wary and unafraid, replied that he had tried no game, that he had forgotten the tenderfoot for a moment and that he did not believe the latter would prove to be the sought for express messenger.

One of the men, at a signal from his leader, relieved Billy's belt of considerable weight. Then the latter was permitted to sit on a cracker box. Two more mounted the little stairs. In a moment they returned to report that the upper story contained no human beings, strange or otherwise, except the girl, but that there remained a small trunk. Under further orders they dragged the trunk down into the barroom. It was broken open and found to contain clothes of the plainsman's cut, material and state of wear, a neatly folded Mexican saddle showing use and a rawhide girth.

"Tenderfoot!" said Black Hank contemptuously.

The outlaws had already scattered outside to look for the trail. In this they were unsuccessful, reporting indeed that not the faintest sign indicated escape in any direction.

Billy knew his man. The tightening of Black Hank's close knit brows meant but one thing. One does not gain chieftainship of any kind in the west without propping ascendancy with acts of ruthless decision. Billy leaped from his cracker box with the suddenness of the puma, seized Black Hank firmly about the waist, whirled him into a sort of shield and began an earnest struggle for the instant possession of the outlaw's drawn revolver. It was a gallant attempt, but unsuccessful. In a moment Billy was plinked to the floor and Black Hank was rubbing his aching forearm. After that the only question was whether it should be rope or bullet.

Now, when Billy had gone downstairs the stranger had wasted no more time at the window. He had in his possession \$50,000 in greenbacks which he was to deliver as soon as possible to the Buck Tail agency in Wyoming. The necessary change of stage lines had forced him to stay overnight at Billy Knapp's hotel.

The messenger seized his bag and softly ran along through the canvas partitioned rooms wherein Billy slept to a narrow window which he had already noticed gave out almost directly into the pine woods. The window was of oiled paper, and its catch baffled him. He knew it should slide back, but it refused to slide for him. He did not dare to break the paper because of the crackling noise. A voice at his shoulder startled him.

"I'll show you," whispered the red cheeked girl.

She was wrapped loosely in a blanket, her hair falling about her shoulder and her bare feet showing beneath her coverings. The little man suffered at once an agony of embarrassment in which the thought of his errand was lost. It was recalled to him by the girl.

"There you are," she whispered, showing him the open window.

"Thank you," he stammered painfully. "I assure you—I wish—"

The girl laughed under her breath.

"That's all right," she said heartily. "I owe you that for calling old whippers off his bronc, and she kissed him."

The messenger, trembling with self-consciousness, climbed hastily through the window, ran the broad loop of the satchel up his arm and, instead of dropping to the ground, as the girl had expected, swung himself lightly into the branches of a rather large scrub oak that grew near. She listened to the rustle of the leaves for a moment as he neared the trunk and then, unable longer to restrain her curiosity in regard to the doings below, turned to the stairway.

As she did so two men mounted. They examined the rooms of the upper story hastily, but carefully, paying scant attention to her, and departed swearing. In a few moments they returned for the stranger's trunk. Nell followed as far as the stairway. There she heard and saw things, and fled in bitter dismay to the back of the house, when Billy Knapp was overpowered.

At the window she knelt, clasping her hands and placing her head between her bare arms. Women in the west, at least women like Nell, do not weep. But she came near it. Suddenly she raised her head. A voice next her ear had addressed her.

She looked here and there and around, but could discover nothing.

"Here, outside," came the low, guarded voice. "In the tree."

Then she saw that the little stranger had not stirred from his first sighting place.

"Beg your pardon, ma'am, for startling you or for addressing you at all, which I shouldn't, but—"

"Oh, never mind that!" cried the girl impatiently, shaking back her hair. So deprecating and timid were the tones that, almost without an effort of the imagination, she could picture the little man's blushes and his half smiling method of delivery. At this supreme moment his littleness and lack of self assertion jarred on her mood. "What you doin' there? Thought you'd vamoose."

"It was safest here," explained the stranger. "I left no trail."

She nodded comprehension of the common sense of this.

"But, ma'am, I took the liberty of speakin' to you because you seems to be in trouble. Of course I ain't got no

right to ask, an' if you don't care to tell me—"

"They're goin' to kill Billy!" broke in Nell with a sob.

"What for?"

"I don't jest rightly make out. They're after some one, and they thinks Billy's cachin' him. I reckon it's you. Billy ain't cachin' nothin', but they thinks he is."

"It's me they's after all right enough. Now you knows where I am, why don't you tell them an' save Billy?"

The girl started, but her keen western mind saw the difficulty at once.

"They thinks Billy perfects you jest the same."

"Do you love him?" asked the stranger.

"God knows I'm purty tough," confessed Nell, sobbing, "but I jest do that!" And she dropped her head again.

The invisible stranger in the gloom fell silent, considering.

"I'm a purty rank proposition myself," said he at last as if to himself, "and I got a job on hand which same I oughta put through without givin' attention on anything else. As a usual play, folks don't care for me, and I don't care much for folks, women especial. They drives me plumb tired. I reckon I don't stack up very high on the blue chips when it comes to cashin' in with that sex anyhow, but in general they gives me as much notice as they lavishes on a doodle bug. I ain't carin', you understand, nary bit, but onet in a dog's age I kind of hankers for a decent look from one of them. I ain't never had no women folks of my own—never. Sometimes I thinks it would be some scrumptious to know a little gal's waitin' for me somewhere. They ain't none. They never will be. I ain't built that way. You treated me white tonight. You're the first woman that ever kissed me of her own accord."

The girl heard a faint scramble, then the soft pat of some one landing on his feet. Peering from the window, she made out a faint shadowy form stealing around the corner of the hotel. She put her hand to her heart and listened. Her understanding of the stranger's motives was vague, but she had caught his confession that her kiss had meant much to him and even in her anxiety she felt an inclination to laugh. She had bestowed that caress as she would have kissed the cold end of a dog's nose.

The men below stairs, after some discussion, had decided on bullet. This was out of consideration for Billy's standing as a frontiersman. Besides, he had stolen no horses. In order not to delay matters the execution was fixed for the present time and place. Billy stood with his back to the logs of his own hotel, his hands and feet bound, but his eyes uncovered. He had never lost his nerve. In the short respite which preparation demanded he told his opponents what he thought of them.

"Proud?" he concluded a long soliloquy as if to the reflector of the lamp. "Proud?" he repeated meditatively. "This yere Hank's jest that proud he's all avelled up like a poisoned pup. Ain't every one kin cornal a man and git \$50,000 without turnin' a hair?"

Black Hank distributed three men to do the business. There were no heroes. The execution of this man was necessary to him, not because he was particularly angry over the escape of the messenger—he expected to capture that individual in due time—but in order to preserve his authority over his men. He was in the act of moving back to give the shooters room when he heard the door open and shut.

He turned. Before the door stood a small, consumptive looking man in a light check suit. The tenderfoot carried two short barreled Colt's revolvers, one of which he presented directly at Black Hank.

"Nds up!" he commanded sharply.

Hank was directly covered, so he obeyed. The newcomer's eye had a strangely restless quality. Of the other dozen inmates of the room eleven were firmly convinced that the weapon and eye not directed at their leader were personally concerned with themselves. The twelfth thought he saw his chance. To the bewildered onlookers there seemed to be a flash and a bang instantaneous. Then things were as before. One of the stranger's weapons still pointed at Black Hank's breast; the second at each one of the others. Only the twelfth man, he who had seen his chance, had collapsed forward to the floor. No one could assure himself positively that he had discerned the slightest motion on the part of the stranger.

"Now," said the latter sharply, "one at a time, gentlemen. Drop your gun!" This last to Black Hank. "Muzzle down. Drop it! Correct."

One of the men in the back of the room stirred slightly on the ball of his foot.

"Steady there!" said the stranger. The man stiffened.

"Next gent," went on the little man, subtly indicating another. The latter obeyed without hesitation. "Next! Now you. Now you in the corner."

One after another the pistols clashed to the floor. Not for an instant could a single inmate of the apartment, armed or unarmed, flatter himself that his slightest motion was overlooked. They were like tigers on the crouch, ready to spring the moment the man's guard lowered. It did not lower. The huddled figure on the floor reminded them of what might happen. They obeyed.

"Step back!" commanded the stranger next. In a moment he had them standing in a row against the wall, rigid, upright, their hands over their heads. Then for the first time the stranger moved from his position by the door.

"Call her," he said to Billy—"the girl."

Billy raised his voice. "Nell! Oh, Nell!"

In a moment she appeared in the doorway at the foot of the stairs without hesitation or fear. She had slipped on a dress. When she perceived the state of affairs, she brightened almost mischievously.

"Would you just as soon, ma'am, if it ain't troublin' you too much, just sort of naturally untie Billy?" requested the stranger.

She did so. The hotel keeper stretched his arms.

"Now pick up them guns, please."

The two set about it.

"Where's that infernal old reprobate?" howled Billy suddenly, looking about for Charley.

The patriarch had quietly slipped away.

"You can drop them arms," advised the stranger, lowering the muzzles of his weapons. The leader started to say something.

"You shut up!" said Billy, selecting his own revolvers from the heap.

The stranger suddenly picked up one of the Colt's single action revolvers which lay on the floor and, holding the trigger back against the guard, exploded the six charges by hitting the hammer smartly with the palm of his hand. In the thrusting motion of this discharge he evidently had design, for the first six wineglasses on Billy's bar were shattered. It was wonderful work, rattling fire, quicker than a self-cooker even. He selected another weapon. From a pile of tomato cans he took one

and tossed it into the air. Before it had fallen he had perforated it twice, and as it rolled along the floor he helped its progression by four more bullets which left streams of tomato juice where they had hit. The room was full of smoke. The group watched, fascinated.

Then the men against the wall grew rigid. Out of the film of smoke long, vivid streams flashed toward them, right and left, like the alternating steam of a locomotive's pistons. Smash, smash, smash, smash, lit the bullets with regular thud. With the twelfth discharge the din ceased. Midway between the heads of each pair of men against the wall was a round hole. No one was touched.

A silence fell. The smoke lightened and blew slowly through the window and open door. The horses, long since deserted by their guardian in favor of the excitement within, whinnied. The stranger dropped the smoking Colts and quietly reproduced his own short barreled arms from his side pockets. Billy broke the spell at last.

"That's shootin'!" he observed, with a sigh.

"The fifty thousand is outside," said the stranger. "Do you want 'em?"

There was no reply.

"I aims to pull out on one of these here broncs of yours," said he. "Billy, he's all right. He doesn't know nothin' about me."

He collected the six shooters from the floor.

"I just takes these with me for a spell," he remarked. "You finds them, if you looks hard enough, along on th' trail—likewise your broncs."

He backed toward the door.

"I'm layin' for the man that sticks his head outen that door," he warned.

"Stranger," called Black Hank as he neared the door.

The little man paused.

"Might I ask your name?"

"My name is Alfred," replied the latter.

Black Hank looked chagrined.

"I've heard tell of you," he remarked. The stranger's eye ran over the room and encountered that of the girl. He shrank into himself and blushed.

"Good night," he said hastily and disappeared. A moment later the beat of hoofs became audible as he led the bunch of horses away.

For an instant no one spoke. Then Billy exclaimed, "Hank, I means to stand pat with you, but you let that kid alone or I plugs you!" Billy was the only man armed.

"Kid, huh?" grunted Hank. "Alfred a kid! I've heard tell of him."

"What have you heard?" inquired the girl.

"He's the plumb best scout on the southern trail and the best pistol shot in the west," replied Black Hank.

The year following Billy Knapp, Alfred and another man named Jim Buckley took across the hills the only wagon train that dared set out that summer.

Chilly Meeting.

The late Sir Richard Jebb, professor of Greek at Cambridge for many years, had the saving grace of humor.

Two men of his acquaintance had quarreled, writes a lifelong friend in *St. James' Budget*, then met while skating.

"They could hardly have met on a colder footing," said Jebb when the incident was related to him.



The tenderfoot.

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